

HIGHLIGHTS OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN BIBLE LANDS

by

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PART THREE

NEW TESTAMENT ARCHAEOLOGY

CHAPTER TWELVE

DISCOVERIES OF GREEK PAPYRUS WRITINGS IN EGYPT

MENTION HAS ALREADY BEEN MADE of papyrus writings found in Egypt that have had bearing on Old Testament times or the Inter-Testamental period. These documents already referred to were written in the Aramaic language, whereas the bulk of papyri finds have been written in the Greek language and have more definite relation to the New Testament era than to the Old Testament times. At this point more needs to be said about the nature of this type of paper which was in such common use in the ancient world.

PAPER AND THE ANCIENT ART OF WRITING

How papyrus was made. First, the white pith of the papyrus plant was cut into long strips, then these were laid down vertically and other strips were placed on these horizontally. The two layers were pressed together into a single sheet; this was dried in the sun and then hammered and rolled into flat layers. Finally it was rubbed with a smooth substance and thus made ready for use. ¹

The papyrus roll. A number of sheets were glued together side by side in order to form a roll of paper. A single sheet of paper averaged about 9 to 11 inches high, and 6 to 9 inches wide. The Epistle to Philemon, and the Second and Third Epistles of John were no doubt each written on a single sheet of papyrus. But the Gospel of Luke, and also Acts of the Apostles, took a roll about 31 or 32 feet long. ²

Pen and ink used. In New Testament times men wrote with reed pens (cf. Ill John 13). They were made from reed stalks that had been thoroughly dried. The ends were sharpened to a point and then split into two parts. Ink is referred to in II Corinthians 3:3; II John 12; and III John 13. One kind of ink used was of an unfading black color, and was made of lampblack, gum, and water. The other kind became a rusty brown color, and was made of nutgalls, green vitriol, and water. ³

THE EARLY DISCOVERIES OF GREEK PAPYRI

The papyri discovery of Grenfell and Hunt at Oxyrhynchus. Perhaps the greatest discovery made in a thousand years was that made by these two men in 1897 when they were digging for the Egypt Exploration Fund at the site of Behnesa, which was the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus. They uncovered a vast quantity of papyrus writings, for the most part written in the Greek of the first century and later centuries. It is true that some few such documents had already been found, but it was only after this discovery had been made that the value of such finds for New Testament study came to be fully appreciated and known to the world. When the boxes filled with these papyri were shipped from Egypt to London, the freight agent weighed them by the ton when they were being billed. 4

The remarkable preservation of this paper. Why did not all this quantity of paper documents perish by rotting after the many centuries since they were written? The sands of Egypt and its very dry climate are responsible for this unusual preservation. Papyrus is easily preserved if it is buried in a dry place. This is especially true if the sheets of it are piled so they are close together. In such a case the inner sheets are less harmed than are the outer ones. 5

A second great discovery of papyri at Tebtunis. In the years 1899-1900 Grenfell and Hunt were again in Egypt hunting for more papyri. They were working at Umm el-Baragat, the site of the ancient Tebtunis. But instead of finding papyri, all they could find were crocodiles. Evidently they were at work in a cemetery for sacred crocodiles of old. At last one of the workmen became so disappointed at finding another crocodile that he flung its mummy against a rock and broke it. This brought the discovery that the buried animal had been stuffed with papyri. Other crocodiles were also found to be filled with these precious documents. Layer after layer of this paper had been stuffed into their mouths. All kinds of documents were included in these finds, including ancient classics, royal ordinances, petitions, contracts, accounts, private letters; and, for the most part, these papyri were dated to the first and second centuries A.D. Of course, other discoveries of papyri have been made since this notable one at the beginning of the century. 6

THE VALUE OF THE PAPYRI FINDS

The great importance of the discoveries. Before the papyri discoveries were made, nobody had ever read a manuscript of a first century scribe that was written in the language of the common people of Egypt and Palestine. It must be remembered that Greek was the universal language of the Roman Empire. Among these papyri were some Bible texts one hundred years earlier than any other manuscripts of the New Testament known at that time. 7

Dr. Deissmann responsible for discovery of value of papyri. Due credit should be given to Adolf Deissmann, a young German theological student, who published his discovery two years before Grenfell and Hunt's first papyri finds, namely, that the papyri were written in the exact language of the New Testament. This prepared the way for Deissmann and other scholars later on to make full use of the quantity of papyrus writings that came to be published through the years. Camden Cobern says:

It was Deissmann who caught the revolutionary truth that the gospels were a “people’s book,” written in the dialect of the middle class in the vernacular of the home and shop; written in a style which no literary man of that day would have permitted himself to use, but which did appeal to the masses. . . . The New Testament books were written to working men in the tongue of the working man, the Bible authors freely using the colloquialisms and even the solecisms of the marketplace. It meant that Wycliffe only did for England what Matthew and Mark did for the Roman world. Christianity from its beginning spoke the tongue of the peasant. 8

Light from the papyri on the census at Jesus’ birth. Critics of the New Testament used to accuse Luke of making five mistakes in his account of the census at the time of the birth of Jesus (2:1-6).

- (1) They said that Cyrenius was not governor at this time, but later.
- (2) They said Augustus never ordered such a census.
- (3) They said there wasn’t a regular system of taking a census.
- (4) If there was such a census, they said it would not be necessary to go to the ancestral home.
- (5) If the husband went, they argued, it would not be necessary for the wife to go. 9

It was Sir William Ramsay, the great New Testament archaeologist, who came to the rescue of Luke as an accurate historian, and proved to the world that the writer of the third Gospel was a careful historian to be trusted for accuracy of detail. Ramsay proved by a group of inscriptions that Quirinius was twice governor of Syria: first, at the time of the Saviour’s birth, and again at a later date. 10

In answering the other charges against Luke, it was light from the Egyptian papyri that corroborated Scripture. Various of these papyrus writings indicate that there was a census every fourteen years. The finding of actual census papers in Egypt proved this. The cycle of these periodic enrollments has been traced to the approximate date of 6-5 B.C. as being the date for the one recorded by Luke, which was the first one, and this is the generally accepted date for the birth of Jesus. We know now that our calendar purporting to start at Christ’s birth was mistaken by several years. So when Luke wrote, “**This taxing** [the first enrollment] **was made when Cyrenius** [Quirinius] **was governor of Syria**” (Luke 2:2), he was correct. 11

Here is a portion of one of these census returns which was discovered by Grenfell and Hunt at Oxyrhynchus. The document begins by describing the three persons who lived in the house to which is added the words: “Total—three persons.” Then comes the following paragraph:

I the above-mentioned Thermoutharion, along with my guardian the said Apollonius, swear by Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, Emperor, that assuredly the preceding document makes a sound and true return of those living with me, and that there is no one else living with me, neither a stranger, nor an Alexandrian citizen, nor a freedman, nor a Roman citizen, nor an Egyptian, in addition to the aforesaid. If I am swearing truly, may it be well with me, but if falsely, the reverse.

Near the end of the document appear the words: "In the ninth year of Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus Emperor." 12

But what about the return of households to their ancestral home town? There is now in the British Museum a parallel to the statement of Luke 2:3, which is another papyrus document coming from Egypt. It was an edict by the governor of Egypt, A.D. 104. Here is a translation of this Greek writing:

Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt [says]: Seeing that the time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing out of their homes to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census, and may also attend diligently to the cultivation of their allotments. 13

At every point of issue Luke's account of the census has been triumphantly vindicated. The papyri have proved that there was such an enrollment, that a census was instituted every fourteen years, and that households were required to return to the home of their ancestry. 14

Examples of light from the papyri on New Testament interpretation. The study of these Greek documents from Egypt has thrown a flood of light on the meaning of many New Testament words and phrases. Students of the Greek New Testament owe much to the discovery of these early writings. A few examples are herewith given, showing the value of such a study.

When the Roman emperors, beginning with the first century A.D., claimed deity for themselves, they were supposed to be addressed by their subjects as "Lord" or "God." Oxyrhynchus papyri mention Augustus Caesar as "the god and lord emperor." In one papyrus document an Egyptian official uses the title, "Lord Nero," three times. Furthermore, in those days a certain day of the month received the name, "Lord's Day" in honor of the emperor. It is quite probable that the early disciples of Christ gave the name of "Lord's Day" to their weekly day of rest and worship as a protest against the cult of emperor worship. And we can well imagine the apostle Paul was protesting against emperor worship when he wrote the words, "**That every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord**" (Philippians 2:11). In the year A.D. 155 Polycarp went to a martyr's death rather than say the formula, "Lord Caesar," which implied deity to the emperor. 15

The words of Paul in Colossians 2:14 have an interesting parallel in the papyri. Paul wrote, "**Having blotted out the handwriting.**" In the Florentine Papyri the governor of Egypt gives the order, "Let the handwriting be crossed out." I.O.U.'s were officially canceled by being "crossed out." And this no doubt gave rise to the later Christian custom of using the cross-letter Chi (X) as a symbol of canceling our debt of sin by means of the cross. 16

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus said three times over, concerning hypocrites of His day, "**They have their reward**" (Matthew 6:2,5, 16). This expression was often used in the papyri of a person who had already given a receipt and so had absolutely no further claim for a payment. The Pharisees had given receipt in full for their reward when they were seen of men, and, therefore, could expect no reward from God. 17

A fragment of John's Gospel from the second century. In 1901 the John Rylands Library of Manchester, England, secured a quantity of papyri which Grenfell and Hunt had unearthed in Egypt. Experts worked for years in examining and appraising these documents. In the year 1934 C. H. Roberts discovered in the collection a fragment of John's Gospel, which gives evidence of having been written prior to the year A.D. 150. On the front of the leaf John 18:31-33 is given, and on the back of it John 18:37, 38 appears. Critical scholars used to declare that the Gospel of John could not have been written until around A.D. 160. But here we find a fragment of that Gospel written in Egypt about A.D. 150. Certainly this is proof that John's Gospel itself must have been written some years before this copy of it was made in Egypt. 18

1. Camden M. Cobern, *The New Archeological Discoveries and their Bearing upon the New Testament*, p. 4. See also George Milligan, *Selections from the Greek Papyri*, pp. 21-22.
2. Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, p. 310; Milligan, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.
3. Finegan, *ibid.*, pp. 309-311.
4. Cobern, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 19.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 40.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 23.
8. Camden M. Cobern, *The New Archeological Discoveries and their Bearing upon the New Testament* (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 5th ed. revised 1921), pp. 30, 31.
9. A. T. Robertson, *Luke the Historian in the Light of Research*, p. 118f.
10. W. M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of The New Testament*, pp. 275-295.
11. Robertson, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-129.
12. George Milligan, *Selections from the Greek Papyri* (Cambridge: University Press, 1912), pp. 46, 47.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 73; cf. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 271.
14. For fuller account of these issues, see Ramsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-274.
15. Cobern, *op. cit.*, p. 127; Deissmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 353, 354, 356, 357-359.
16. *Ibid.*, Deissmann, pp. 333, 334.
17. Cobern, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
18. George A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible*, ed. 1937, pp. 587-588.

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